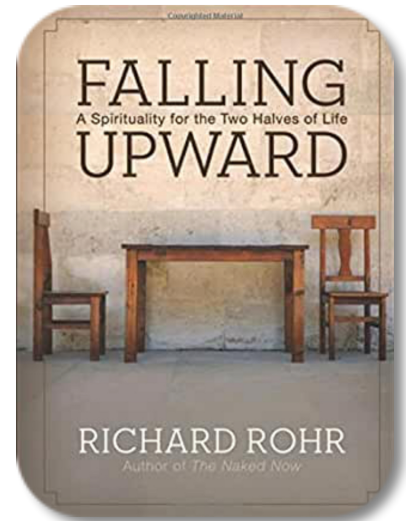


Falling Upward

A spirituality for the two halves of life (a summary by Pat Evert)

The first half of life is discovering the script, and the second half is actually writing it and owning it. **So get ready for some new freedom, some dangerous permission.** You set out to find it by both grace and daring. Most get little reassurance from others, or even have full confidence that they are totally right. Setting out is always a leap of faith, a risk in the deepest sense of the term, and yet an adventure too. If there is such a thing as human perfection, it seems to emerge precisely from how we handle the imperfection that is everywhere, especially our own. What a clever place for God to hide holiness, so that only the humble and earnest will find it! We do grow and increase, but by a far different path than the ego would ever imagine. Only the soul knows and understands.

Those who have somehow fallen, and fallen well, are the only ones who can go up and not misuse “up.” **The rational mind cannot process love or suffering**, for example, it tends to either avoid them, deny them, or blame somebody for them, when in fact **they are the greatest spiritual teachers of all, this is what makes something inherently religious.** Whatever reconnects (re-ligio) our parts to the Whole is an experience of God, whether we call it that or not.



Chapter 1: The Two Halves of Life - In the first half of life, success, security, and containment—“looking good” to ourselves and others—are almost the only questions. Many church sermons I have heard my whole life seem never to move beyond this first level of development, and do not even challenge it. The “experts” in all religions are always forgiving, compassionate, and radically inclusive. They do not create enemies, and they move beyond the boundaries of their own “starter group” while still honoring them and making use of them. Jesus the Jew criticizes his own religion the most, yet never leaves it! You can only stretch yourself to comprehend people just a bit beyond yourself. Although Jesus' first preached message is clearly “change!” Ken Wilber says that most of us are only willing to call 5 percent of our present information into question at any one point. By definition, **authentic God experience is always “too much”! It consoles our True Self only after it has devastated our false self.**

Chapter 2: The Hero and Heroine's Journey - Those embarking on this journey are often a prince or princess and, if not, sometimes even of divine origin, which of course they always know nothing about! They have the call to go out and beyond their present comfort zone. They are almost always “wounded”. The wound becomes the secret key,

even “sacred,” a wound that changes them dramatically, which, by the way, is the precise meaning of the wounds of Jesus! One who “goes the distance,” whatever that takes, and then has plenty left over for others. True heroism serves the common good, or it is not really heroism at all.

Chapter 3: The First Half of Life - Our Western dualistic minds do not process paradoxes very well. Without a contemplative mind, we do not know how to hold creative tensions. We are better at rushing to judgment and demanding a complete resolution to things before we have learned what they have to teach us. Cognitively rigid and “risk adverse”; who want to circle the wagons around their imagined secure and superior group.

The loyal soldier cannot get you to the second half of life. You have to say good-bye when you move into the subtlety of midlife and later life. The first battles solidify the ego and create a stalwart loyal soldier; the second battles defeat the ego because God always wins. **The ego hates losing, even to God.** Resistance to change and growth, and its substituting of small, low-cost moral issues for the real ones that ask us to change, instead of always trying to change other people. When you first discharge your loyal soldier, it will feel like a loss of faith or loss of self. **God has to undo our illusions secretly, as it were,** when we are not watching and not in perfect control, say the mystics.

Chapter 4: The Tragic Sense of Life - It is those creatures and those humans who are on the edge of what we have defined as normal, proper, or good who often have the most to teach us. The exceptions keep us humble and searching, and not rushing toward resolution to allay our anxiety. Our mind, it seems, is more pleased with universals: never-broken, always-applicable rules and patterns that allow us to predict and control things. This is good for science, but lousy for religion. It all depends on whether we are willing to see down as up; or as Jung put it, that “where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold.” True Gospel, as rare as it might be, still heals and renews all that it touches. We have blamed the victim, or have had little pity for victims, while daring to worship a victim image of God.

Chapter 5: Stumbling over the Stumbling Stone - So failure and humiliation force you to look where you never would otherwise. “Why are you hurting yourself by kicking against the goad?” (Acts 26: 14). The goad or cattle prod is the symbol of both the encouragement forward and our needless resistance to it, which only wounds us further. Falling, losing, failing, transgression, and sin are the pattern, I am sorry to report. Yet they all lead toward home. Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan, and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find the real source, the deep well, or the constantly flowing stream. **For Jesus and for his followers, the crucifixion became the dramatic symbol of that necessary and absurd stumbling stone.** Many Christians even made the cross into a mechanical “substitutionary atonement theory” to fit into their quid pro quo worldview, instead of suffering its inherent tragedy, as Jesus did himself. Jesus must be crucified, or there can be no resurrection. If the Gospel is indeed “good news”, then it has to be win-win, and a giant victory for both God and us.

Chapter 6: Necessary Suffering - Anyone who wants to save his life, must lose it. Reality, creation, nature itself, what I call the “the First Body of Christ,” has no choice in the matter of necessary suffering. “The Second Body of Christ,” the formal church, always has the freedom to say yes or no. Love only happens in the realm of freedom. How consistently the great religious teachers and founders leave home, go on pilgrimage to far-off places, do a major turnabout, choose downward mobility; and how often it is their parents, the established religion at that time, spiritual authorities, and often even civil authorities who fight against them. There is a necessary suffering that cannot be avoided, which Jesus calls “losing our very life,” or losing what I and others call the “false self.” Your false self is your role, title, and personal image that is largely a creation of your own mind and attachments. It will and must die in exact correlation to how much you want the Real. “How much false self are you willing to shed to find your True Self?” is the lasting question. Your True Self is who you objectively are from the beginning, in the mind and heart of God, “the face you had before, your absolute identity, which can be neither gained nor lost by any technique, group affiliation, morality, or formula whatsoever.

Chapter 7: Home and Homesickness - The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that works largely from within and “secretly,” at “the deepest levels of our desiring,” For postmodern people, the universe is not inherently enchanted, as it was for the ancients. God seems to have created things that continue to create and recreate themselves from the inside out. It is no longer God's one-time creation or evolution; rather, God's form of creation precisely is evolution. Finally God is allowed to be fully incarnate, which was supposed to be Christianity's big trump card from the beginning! God hides, and is found, precisely in the depths of everything, even and maybe especially in the deep fathoming of our fallings and failures. If we go to the depths of anything, we will begin to knock upon something substantial, “real,” and with a timeless quality to it. We will move from the starter kit of “belief” to an actual inner knowing. This “something real” is what all the world religions were pointing to when they spoke of heaven, nirvana, bliss, or enlightenment. They were not wrong at all; their only mistake was that they pushed it off into the next world.

Chapter 8: Amnesia and the Big Picture - We all seem to suffer from a tragic case of mistaken identity. Life is a matter of becoming fully and consciously who we already are, but it is a self that we largely do not know. It is as though we are all suffering from a giant case of amnesia. The Gospel was just too good to be true—for a future-oriented, product-oriented, and win-lose worldview. Any discovery or recovery of our divine union has been called “heaven” by most traditions. Its loss has been called “hell.” The tragic result of our amnesia is that we cannot imagine that these terms are first of all referring to present experiences. When you do not know who you are, you push all enlightenment off into a possible future reward and punishment system, within which hardly anyone wins. **Only the True Self knows that heaven is now and that its loss is hell—now. Everyone is in heaven when he or she has plenty of room for communion**

and no need for exclusion. The more room you have to include, the bigger your heaven

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will be. There must be the logical possibility of excluding oneself from union and to choose separation or superiority over community and love. No one is in hell unless that individual himself or herself chooses a final aloneness and separation. Ken Wilber described the later stages of life well when he said that **the classic spiritual journey always begins elitist and ends egalitarian. Always!** The ego clearly prefers an economy of merit, where we can divide the world into winners and losers, to any economy of grace, where merit or worthiness loses all meaning.

Chapter 9: A Second Simplicity - I left the garden, just as Adam and Eve had to do, even though my new Scripture awareness made it obvious that Adam and Eve were probably not historical figures, but important archetypal symbols. Darn it! It is sad and disconcerting for a while, outside the garden. I was always being moved toward greater differentiation and larger viewpoints, and simultaneously toward a greater inclusivity in my ideas, a deeper understanding of people, and a more honest sense of justice. God always became bigger and led me to bigger places. **If God could “include” and allow, then why not I?** I did not see many examples of God “smiting” his enemies; in fact, it was usually God's friends who got smitten, as Teresa of Avila noted! If God asked me to love unconditionally and universally, then it was clear that God operated in the same way. Either Jesus is the “savior of the world” (John 4: 42), or he is not much of a savior at all. I further believe that a free and loving God would create things that continue to recreate themselves, exactly as all parents desire for their children. Finally, one has lived long enough to see that “everything belongs,” even the sad, absurd, and futile parts. If you have forgiven yourself for being imperfect and falling, you can now do it for just about everybody else. If you have not done it for yourself, I am afraid you will likely pass on your sadness, absurdity, judgment, and futility to others.

Chapter 10: A Bright Sadness - In this second half of life, one has less and less need or interest in eliminating the negative or fearful, making again those old rash judgments, holding on to old hurts, or feeling any need to punish other people. Law is still necessary, of course, but it is not your guiding star, or even close. It has been wrong and cruel too many times. At this stage, I no longer have to prove that I or my group is the best, that my ethnicity is superior, that my religion is the only one that God loves, or that my role and place in society deserve superior treatment. **I am not preoccupied with collecting more goods and services; quite simply, my desire and effort—every day—is to pay back, to give back to the world a bit of what I have received.**

Chapter 11: The Shadowlands - Your shadow is what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see. The more you have cultivated and protected a chosen persona, the more shadow work you will need to do. As you do your inner work, you will begin to know that your self-image is nothing more than just that, and not worth protecting, promoting, or denying. Yet I still do it every day, and become my own worst, judge, attorney, and jury within ten seconds of an offending statement. You need to see beyond your own shadow and disguise and to find who you are “hidden [with Christ] in God,” as Paul puts it. The Zen masters call it “the face you had before you were born.” This self cannot die and always lives, and is your True Self. Spiritual maturity is largely a growth in seeing; and full seeing seems to take most of our

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lifetime, with a huge leap in the final years, months, weeks, and days of life, as any hospice volunteer will tell you. **If you do not “eat” such humiliations with regularity and make friends with the judges, the courtrooms, and the officers (that is, all those who reveal to you and convict you of your own denied faults) who come into your life, you will surely remain in the first half of life forever.** We are all in one kind of closet or another and are even encouraged by society to play our roles. Usually everybody else can see your shadow, so it is crucial that you learn what everybody else knows about you—except you! Shadow work literally “saves you from yourself” (your false self), which is the foundational meaning of salvation to begin with. We were so encouraged to avoid sin that many of us instead avoided facing our shadow, and then we ended up “sinning” even worse—while unaware besides! **You finally are who you are, and can be who you are, without disguise or fear.**

Chapter 12: New Problems and New Directions - Learn and obey the rules very well, so you will know how to break them properly. —THE DALAI LAMA. Your circle of real confidants and truly close friends will normally grow smaller, but also more intimate. The first half of life defines itself by “no” and the second half of life by “yes.” There is a certain real loneliness if you say yes and all your old friends are saying no. So be prepared when your old groups, friendships, and even churches no longer fully speak to you the way they used to. But I promise you that those confusing feelings are far outdistanced by a new ability to be alone—and to be happy alone. One of the great surprises at this point is that you find that the cure for your loneliness is actually solitude! Silence is the only language spacious enough to include everything and to keep us from slipping back into dualistic judgments and divisive words. A kind of double belonging is characteristic of people at this stage. No one group meets all of their needs, desires, and visions. What this illustrates, of course, is a newly discovered capacity for what many religions have called “non-dualistic thinking” or both-and thinking. It is almost the benchmark of our growth into the second half of life. This stance is not passivity at all. It is, in fact, the essential link between true contemplation and skillful action.

Chapter 13: Falling Upward - Helen Keller was convinced that life was about service to others and not about protecting or lamenting her supposedly handicapped body. That seems to be the great difference between transformed and non-transformed people. **Great people come to serve and not to be served.** By the second half of life you learn to tell the difference between who you really are and how others can mirror that or not. This will keep you from taking either insults or praise too seriously. But, by all means, you must find at least one true mirror that reveals your inner, deeper, and yes divine image. We really do find ourselves through one another's eyes, and only when that has been done faithfully can we mirror others with freedom, truth and compassion. Failure and suffering are the great equalizers and levelers among humans. Success is just the opposite. Communities and commitment can form around suffering much more than around how wonderful or superior we are. Like any true mirror, the gaze of God receives us exactly as we are, without judgment or distortion, subtraction or addition. Such perfect receiving is what transforms us. Soon we who are gazed upon so perfectly can pass on the same accepting gaze to all others who need it. Just remember this, no

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one can keep you from the second half of your own life except yourself. My conviction is that some falling apart of the first journey is necessary for this to happen, so do not waste a moment of time lamenting poor parenting, lost job, failed relationship, physical handicap, gender identity, economic poverty, or even the tragedy of any kind of abuse. Pain is part of the deal.